1934

Emily Dickinson: The Growth of Her Reputation in Periodical Criticism, 1890-1934

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EMILY DICKINSON: THE GROWTH OF HER REPUTATION
IN PERIODICAL CRITICISM
1890 - 1934
by
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Loyola University
1934
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PREFACE

In the history of American Literature there is perhaps no more interesting and unique study of a reputation than that to be found in the story of Emily Dickinson's. It will be the purpose of this thesis to show: (1) that when her work was first published, five years after her death, its reception by the public, if sales are an indication, was very favorable, in spite of the fact that the critics were either decidedly unfriendly or, with a few exceptions, most undecided; (2) that from 1897 to 1914, she was "a forgotten poetess"; (3) that the publication of The Single Hound in 1914, coinciding as it did with the beginnings of the "New Movement" in verse, resulted in her reclaiming; (4) that her reputation grew steadily until 1924, when her popularity was sufficient to warrant an edition of Complete Poems and a biography; (5) that her reputation was further augmented through these two volumes and through the interest in her personal life which developed as a result of the biography; (6) that the high point in her reputation was reached in 1930, with the numerous publications of that year, and (7) that her place in American Literature is yet to be assigned.

Due to the nature of the thesis, numerous citations from periodical criticism have been used and a chronological bibliography rather than an alphabetical one, has been employed as being more expedient to a tracing of the reputation.
CHAPTER I

Born in 1830 at Amherst, Massachusetts, Emily Dickinson came into a Puritan heritage which had just begun to decline. Her family had helped to found Amherst and was deeply religious. In describing them in a letter to Col. Higginson she writes:

"They are religious, except me, and address an eclipse, every morning, whom they call 'Father.'" 1

She attended the public schools of the town and in the fall of 1847, entered South Hadley Female Seminary. Describing her early background one reviewer says:

"Her environment in childhood and youth was of a Judaic strictness hardly now imaginable. Christmas Day was not in the holidays; it was one of the dark days of the year. The joyful thought of the world's redemption exposed to Emily's mentors a grievous side. The world was redeemed, their logic taught them, only because it needed to be redeemed, and therefore they spent Christmas fasting...Amherst, Mass., where the Dickinson family had been established for generations, lived by precept...However, Emily, from her earliest years, perceived that the rigor (which was perhaps essential to the religion) was irreligious in itself. At school she protested, another Shelley, against the Christmas of mortification, and was expelled, though only for a time. Her aspiring mind possessed itself, in natural heritage, of the high walks of truth and had no use for the stilts and crutches by which common mortals perilously ascend to them." 2

The winter of 1853 she spent in Washington, and in the spring of that year went to Philadelphia, where she is said to have met and

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fallen in love with the Rev. Charles Wadsworth. Learning that he was
married, she fled, according to her niece's account, to Amherst and from
that time forth, lived the life of a recluse, filling out her days with
cryptic and searching poetry.

According to the more understanding critics, her retirement was not
a result of an unhappy love affair. It was rather the effect of the en-
vironment to which she could not reconcile herself. Her father was a
Puritan of the old school and as Professor Zabel says in his article
in Poetry for January, 1931:

"His daughter faced a world of esthetic and creative apathy. Of
her parents she wrote that 'her mother did not care for thought' and
'if Father is asleep on the sofa the house is full.' In the South
Hadley Female Seminary, she was incited to her first and last re-
volt against the oppression of Puritanism." 3

Something of her attitude toward the world in which she found herself
may be gleaned from her remark in another letter to Col. Higginson:

"You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown, and
a dog large as myself, that my father bought me. They are better
than beings, because they know and do not tell; and the noise in
the pool at noon excels my piano." 4

and again in:

"Men and women--they talk of hallowed things, aloud, and
embarrass my dog." 5

3. M.D.Zabel, "Christina Rosetti and Emily Dickinson", Poetry, XXXVII
4. Quoted from "Letters of Emily Dickinson", The Critic XXVI(February 16,
1895), p. 119.
5. Ibid.
In the "polar privacy" which she chose for herself, she still clung fast to her friends, with whom she kept in touch through letters, the most capricious and charming letters perhaps, that any correspondent ever received.

"Pardon my sanity in a world insane," she wrote to one of them, "and love me if you will, for I had rather be loved than be called a king on earth or a Lord in Heaven."

and again:

"My friends are my estate--Forgive me the avarice to hoard them." 6

One of her letters she wrote in 1861, to Col. Higginson, the then editor of the Atlantic Monthly, including a few samples of her poetry and saying:

"I would like to learn. Could you tell me how to grow or is it unconveyed like melody or witchcraft?" 7

Higginson, however, although he was deeply impressed with the content of her work, had faults to find with its form. Also

"You are writing for the average eye", he cautioned, "and must submit to its verdict. Do not trouble yourself about the light on your statue; it is the light of the public square which must test its value." 8

But Emily was not interested in submitting to the verdict of the average eye nor was she concerned with the light of the public square.

6. Ibid.
7. T. W. Higginson, op. cit. p. 445
She fortunately decided that the art was "unconveyed" and wrote as she pleased, leaving, when she died in 1886, a mahogany bureau filled with the magnificent records of her own singular and defiant spirit.

So curiously untouched was Emily Dickinson by outward influences that it is difficult to realize that she was contemporary with Hawthorne, Emerson, Whittier, Whitman, Lowell and Poe at the flowering of their genius, and that she came to maturity simultaneously with one of the most critical periods in American history. The accident of delayed publication together with the intensely individualistic type of her genius has made her seem almost our contemporary. As Professor Whicher says:

"She was forced to fight a private battle to preserve self-respect and personal integrity. Her individual struggle, without consciousness on her part of its being so, was a replica of the greater struggle going on elsewhere: the acute accidents of her experience paralleled and intensified many fold for her the predicament of her generation. There were no palliatives at hand, and in any event she was not one to accept compromise. She met the realities of her situation, and worked out a personal adjustment to them according to the pattern of her need. That was exactly what her better known contemporaries were failing to do." 9

The fact that a full appreciation of Emily Dickinson's genius had to wait until the twentieth century, which while dating most of the

Victorian poets, acknowledged her work as "perhaps the finest by a woman in the English language", leads us to think of her as one who was born before her time. When we come to know her, however, we find ourselves thinking of her as a kind of sprite—a "lunar moth" born out of place and out of time, a figure not to be overtaken by any so-called critics or recorders of literary histories. As she herself put it:

"The overtakelessness of those
Who have accomplished Death,
Majestic is to me beyond
The Majesties of Earth.

The soul her "not at Home"
Inscribes upon the flesh,
And takes her fair aerial gait
Beyond the hope of touch." 11

CHAPTER II

On November, 12, 1890, five years after her death, the first edition of Emily Dickinson's poems was given to the public. They were edited by Col. T. W. Higginson, with whom Emily had, over a period of several years, carried on a correspondence regarding her work, and Mabel Loomis Todd, an Amherst friend, who, at the urgent insistence of the poet's sister Lavinia, had copied the poems. Neither of them thought that she would ever have a large audience; their idea was that she might have an appeal to the few who, as Mrs. Todd put it, "could understand her unique ways." While they were working on it, Col. Higginson wrote to Mrs. Todd:

"You are the only person who can feel as I do about the extraordinary thing we have done in recording this rare genius. I feel as if we had climbed to a cloud, pulled it away and revealed a new star behind it." 13

Later, in his article in The Atlantic Monthly for October, 1891, Higginson wrote:

"When published, her poems were launched quietly, and without any expectation of a wide audience, yet the outcome of it is that six editions of the volume have been sold within six months, a suddenness of success almost without parallel in American Literature." 14

Mrs. Todd, in her article in Harper's Magazine for March, 1930, gives us an account of her feelings with regard to it:

"At last came the great day when the volume was to be issued to the probably indifferent public. That was November 12, 1890, and I waited with something akin to fright for what might be said ... A few copies had been sent to various critics ahead of publication, and reviews began to come from them even before the completed edition was issued. Many of the critics were manifestly bewildered, and could hardly use their accustomed words. But practically all united in admiration of the thoughts which aroused their latent response, although there was practical unanimity in regretting that she would neglect her rhymes so flagrantly.

There were few hostile reviews, but some of them were important. For instance, The London Daily News (Jan. 2, 1891) was harsh and cruel in its utter lack of appreciation or understanding of Emily's peculiar genius. It called her work 'balderdash' and 'mere meandering', a farrago of illiterate and uneducated sentiment.' Andrew Lang in The Illustrated London News, spoke of 'mere nonsense.'... 'Indeed,' he said, 'one turns over Miss Dickinson's book with a feeling that there was poetry in her subconsciousness, but that it never became explicit.' " 15

On the subject of Emily's reception by the public, Mrs. Todd has this to say:

"The first edition was sold out in a few days and the second edition was ready on December eleventh. By the twenty-third, the third edition was exhausted, the fourth all gone in a few weeks, and the fifth was binding early in February... On March eleventh, Mr. Niles wrote me, 'The fifth edition is selling well and the sixth edition is printing.'

And so the book had more than justified my years of toil with little encouragement except the sustained belief in the greatness of Emily's poetry. She, perhaps, would have been the most surprised of her readers, could she have seen from some upper realm the astonishing reception accorded her 'mind'. There were more than five hundred reviews within the first few weeks.

Letters filled with extravagant delight and sympathetic understanding came to me from all over the country and from England, and my mail was augmented to unmanageable proportions. Emily's debut had been a triumphant entry into the life of that public which she 'never saw', but to which, nevertheless, she had sent her message. Her success had been instantaneous with the appearance of the first volume of Poems in 1890; it continued through the second and third volumes which were published in 1891 and 1896 respectively.¹⁶

There seems to be a popular misconception that Emily Dickinson is the "discovery" of twentieth century critics— that she was "ignored" when her works were first published. Mrs. Todd's statistics with regard to criticism and sales serve as adequate contradiction to the latter statement. We can scarcely agree with her, however, that "nearly all (the critics) were friendly". William Dean Howells may be said really to have "discovered" Emily; the others, however, were for the most part, if not definitely unfriendly, at least reserved in their praise. Excerpts from current magazine reviews following Poems, First Series¹⁷ may be quoted to sustain this point.

The November issue of The Nation has this to say:

"The verses are sometimes almost formless, while at other times they show great capacity for delicate and sweet melody, suggesting the chance strains of an Aeolian harp. But in compass of thought, grasp of feeling, and vigor of epithet, they are simply extraordinary and strike notes, very often, like those of some deep-toned organ.

...With all its inequalities and even oddities on its face there is power enough on many a page of this little book to set up

¹⁶. Ibid. pp. 469-471.
¹⁷. Emily Dickinson, op.cit.
whole volumes of average poetry and the public will inevitably demand to know more of the thoughts and mental process of Emily Dickinson." 18

In contrast to this prophetic view, we might quote an unsigned article in the December issue of The Literary World of 1890:

"It is a somewhat doubtful kindness to the deceased author of these verses to draw them forth from her portfolio into full daylight, to meet the eyes of readers who can have no clew to their creation...Miss Dickinson was surely a woman possessing and possessed by, a share of genius. Ordinary crises of insight and strenuous phrases that seem extorted by hard pressure attest the presence of the god yet few fine minds have been more debarred from expression. Whatever may have been the cause, whether natural bias or long custom, Miss Dickinson was a Laura Bridgeman, her avenues of spiritual communication being closed or deficient....Nothing in recent literature is more pitiful than the pent-up and paralysed inspiration of this truly gifted mind, incapable of mastery of its art or of itself. It is a case of arrested development for which another life seems to offer the only consolation in delayed opportunity....We would commend this strange book of verse—with its sober, old maidenly binding, on which is a silver Indian pipe, half fungus, half flower—to pitying and kindly regard. Here surely is a record of a soul that suffered from isolation and the stress of dumb emotion and the desire to make itself understood by means of a voice so long unused that the sound was strange even to her own ears." 19

It was in the January issue of Harper's Magazine, that William Dean Howells wrote his review which is now famous—famous because he alone in his century had the critical insight to see the real worth in "the strange poems of Emily Dickinson." We quote at length:

"The strange poems of Emily Dickinson will form something like an intrinsic experience with the understanding reader of them.

She never intended or allowed anything more than her anonymous share in A Masque of Poets to be printed in her lifetime; but it was evident that she wished her poetry finally to reach the eyes of that world which she had herself always shrunk from. She could not have made such poetry without knowing its rarity, its singular worth; and no doubt it was a radiant happiness in the twilight of her hidden, silent life.

Col. Higginson speaks of her 'curious indifference to all conventional rules of verse' but adds that 'when a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence.' He notes 'the quality suggestive of William Blake' in her but he leaves us the chance to say that it is a Blake who has read Emerson who has read Blake. The fantasy is often Blakian, as the philosophy is Emersonian, but after feeling this again and again, one is ready to declare that the utterance of this most singular and authentic spirit would have been the same if there had never been a Blake or an Emerson in the world. Here is something that seems compact of both Emerson and Blake, with a touch of Heine too.

...Few of the poems in the book are long, but none of the short quick impulses of intense feeling or poignant thought can be called fragments. They are each a compassed whole, a sharply finished point and there is evidence, circumstantial and direct, that the author spared no pains in the perfect expression of her ideals.

...The companionship of human nature with inanimate nature is very close in certain of the poems; and we have never known the invisible and intangible ties binding all creation in one, so nearly touched as in them.

...If nothing else had come out of our life but this strange poetry, we should feel that in the work of Emily Dickinson, America, or New England rather, had made a distinctive addition to the literature of the world, and could not be left out of any record of it. This poetry is as characteristic of our life as our business enterprise, our political turmoil, our demagogism or our millionaires. 'Listen', says James McNeill Whistler in that 'Ten O'clock' lecture of his which must have made his hearers feel very much lectured indeed, not to say browbeaten---'Listen! there never was an artistic period. There never was an art-loving nation.' But there were moments and there were persons to whom art was dear, and Emily Dickinson was one of these persons, one of these moments in a national life, and she could as well happen in
Certain of the magazines dismissed her quite casually and patronizingly with half a column or so. The February, 1891, issue of The Dial is an example of this:

"Their form is rugged, but 'when a thought takes one's breath away,' as Col. Higginson observes, merely formal defects do not shock us." 21

Others, like The Overland Monthly were a bit less casual but somewhat more splenetic:

"Many of her poems are merely grotesque or fantastic, and some are absolutely unintelligible in their obscurity. One lays down the book with a feeling of perplexity that is akin to exasperation, that being so good they should not be better. They have true poetic quality in them without doubt, but as a whole are too crude and fragmentary to admit of unqualified endorsement." 22

An excerpt from The Saturday Review (London) may serve, with Mrs. Todd's citations, to illustrate the early "British" attitude towards the volume:

"The poems of Miss Emily Dickinson, (who has hitherto been known to Englishmen chiefly if not only by some very injudicious praise of the kind usual with Mr. Howells) are posthumously published.

The edition prepares us for the want of form and polish in her poems, but expects us to regard them as 'poetry torn up from

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the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them, giving a freshness and a fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed. A merit is here implied in their very imperfections as producing the effect of poetry drawn from an absolutely natural unconventional source. We very much doubt, however, whether this conclusion may be fairly adduced from the uneducated and illiterate character of some of these verses, although we fully recognize in them the unmistakable touch of a true poet. The editor suggests a comparison between the poems of this writer and those of William Blake; but beyond the fact that they both are indifferent to the technical rules of art, the comparison is not very far-reaching. Miss Dickinson possessed little of that lyrical faculty to which Blake owes his reputation; but, on the other hand, she is gifted with a far saner mind. Her poems, however, may be said to be distinctly American in their peculiarities, and occasionally call to mind the verses of Emerson. The editor, with his unfailing sympathy, tells us that 'though curiously indifferent to all conventional rules, she yet had a vigorous literary standard of her own, and often altered a word many times to suit an ear which had its own tenacious fastidiousness'. Some of the poems, however, seem destitute of any metre whatever, the lines do not scan, the rhymes are arbitrarily thrown in or left out, in accordance with no fixed system, and grammar, and even good taste are sometimes only conspicuous by their absence.

.....The little volume contains much to exercise the satire and scorn of critics. The sublime in Miss Dickinson's poems comes sometimes dangerously near to the ridiculous; but any fair-minded reader will acknowledge that there is something in her poems which cannot be found in the mechanical productions of mere verse-writers." 23

The fact that Col. Higginson and Mrs. Todd, and more especially, perhaps, the publishers, were more than satisfied with the success of

the 1890 volume was indicated by the appearance the next year of
Poems: Second Series 24. Once more the public was enthusiastic; again
the critics were supercilious.

In a half-column review in The Critic, these comments appear:

"One year ago a volume of curiously formless poems, reveal­
ing an unusual quality of grasp and insight and written by a
woman who had spent her life in seclusion, was edited by T. W.
Higginson and Mrs. M. L. Todd, two of the author's friends......
It has since gone through several editions, proving that a great
many people care comparatively little for the form of expression
in poetry so long as the thoughts expressed are startling, ec­
centric and new.

There are many things in Poems: Second Series, which, as
somebody has said of the former verses, 'take away one's breath.'
But one does not wish to have one's breath taken away entirely.
A thought may be striking but the stroke should not be fatal.
After reading two volumes of Miss Dickinson's poems, one gets ex­
husted, and a healthy mind begins to fear paralysis. There is
too much of the same thing in them--morbid feeling, jerky and dis­
jointed writing, and occasional faults of grammar. We do not
agree with Col. Higginson that in considering these poems 'a
lesson in grammar would be an impertinence'; it is their lack of
grammatical correctness and their absolute formlessness which
keeps them almost outside the pale of poetry. Nevertheless, to
those who liked the first book, we commend the second, even though
it does contain a stanza like the following:

'A few incisive mornings
A few ascetic eves,--
Gone Mr. Bryant's golden-rod,
And Mr. Thompson's sheaves.'  25

T. W. Higginson and M. L. Todd, Boston: Roberts Bros., 1891.
25. "Recent Poetry and Verse", The Critic, New Series, XVI(December 19,
1891), p.346
Probably the most interesting of the magazine reviews following Poems: Second Series was an unsigned one in The Contributor's column of The Atlantic Monthly for January, 1892. Much of it was later incorporated in a chapter on Emily Dickinson in Pongapog Papers a fact which indicates quite clearly that it was the work of Thomas Bailey Aldrich:

"In the first volume of her poetic chaos is a little poem which needs only slight revision in the initial stanza in order to make it worthy of ranking with some of the old swallow flights in Heine's intermezzo:

'I taste a liquor never brewed
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not all the vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an alcohol!

Inebriate of air am I,
And debauchée of dew,
Reeling, through endless summer days,
From inns of molten blue.

When landlords turn the drunken bee
Out of the foxglove's door,
When butterflies renounce their drams
I shall but drink the more!

Till seraphs swing their snowy hats,
And saints to windows run,
To see the little tippler
Leaning against the sun.'

By a slight rearrangement of the first verse, an impeccable rhyme may be procured:

I taste a liquor never brewed
In vats upon the Rhine
No tankards scooped in pearl could yield
An alcohol like mine.

Certainly those inns of molten blue and that disreputable honey-gatherer who got himself turned out of doors at the sign of the Foxglove, are very taking matters. I know of important matters that interest me less. There are three or four bits of this kind in Miss Dickinson's book; but for the most part, the ideas totter and toddle, not having learned to walk. In spite of this, several of the quatrains are curiously touching, they have such a pathetic air of yearning to be poems.

...She had much fancy of a queer sort, but only, as it appears to me, intermittent flashes of imagination. I fail to detect in her work any of that profound thought which her editor professes to discover in it. The phenoninal insight I am inclined to believe, exists only in his partiality; for whenever a woman poet is in question, Mr. Higginson always puts on his rose-colored spectacles. This is being chivalrous; but the invariable result is not clear vision. That Miss Dickinson's whimsical memoranda have a certain something which, for want of a better name we term 'quality' is not to be denied except by the unconvertible heathen, who are not worth conversion. But the incoherence and formlessness of her--I don't know how to designate them--versicles are fatal......An eccentric, dreamy, half-educated recluse in an out-of-the-way New England village (or anywhere else) cannot with impunity set at defiance the laws of gravitation and grammar.

...If Miss Dickinson's 'disjecta membra' are poems, then Shakespeare's prolonged imposition should be exposed without further loss of time and Lord Tennyson ought to be advised of the error of his ways before it is too late. But I do not hold the situation to be so desperate. Miss Dickinson's versicles have a queerness and a quaintness that have a momentary curiosity in emotional bosoms. Oblivion lingers in the immediate neighborhood."

It is rather amusing to note that the last sentence does not appear in Pongapog Papers, published ten years later. There, Mr. Alderich concludes with:

"Miss Dickinson's stanzas, with their impossible rhyme, their involved significance, their interrupted flute-note of birds that have no continuous music, seem to have caught the ear of a group of eager listeners. A shy New England blue bird, shifting its light load of song, has, for the moment, been mistaken for a stray nightengale."

Miss Anna Mary Wells in American Literature, for November, 1929, calls attention to an undated, unsigned clipping from The Boston Transcript, now in the possession of the Jones Library at Amherst:

"Evidently printed soon after this time it reprints much of Aldrich's article and reveals incidentally how great Miss Dickinson's poetry had become.

'The Atlantic Monthly is, if not the last, almost the last of our periodicals that care enough for literature, pure and simple, to criticize it without fear and without favor, and without regard to the fads of the time--Browningese, Ibsenese, or to come to the latest, Dickinsonese, which is now a mild epidemic in New England. Miss Dickinson was a Massachusetts woman whose life was passed in reading and writing--in reading earnest, profound books which she was unable to digest, and in writing what she mistook for poetry and what to the irreverent mind sounds like the worst parts of Emerson and Blake.'

The fact that comparison of Emily Dickinson's fame with that of Browning and Ibsen was not considered out of proportion is another interesting commentary on her position in the literary consciousness of the 1890's. In any case the mild epidemic endured long enough to justify the printing of two more volumes of poems,

28. Aldrich, op.cit. p.86
the Second and Third series and the issuing of a volume of letters." 29

The volume of letters, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd 30 appeared in 1894. A review in the December issue of The Nation gives us clearly the two schools of criticism with regard to the work of Emily Dickinson:

"Opinion will probably swing between the conviction that these letters are a precious legacy of genius for which we have to thank the scrupulous industry of Mrs. Todd and the generosity of Miss Lavinia Dickinson, and the equally strong feeling that they are the abnormal expression of a woman abnormal to the point of disease and that their publication by a friend and sister is not the least abnormal thing about them." 31

An article in The Literary World for December of 1894, is an example of the attitude of the more "bewildered" and cautious critics:

"New England has produced many original growths to puzzle and fascinate the student of psychology. None is more sure to move recurrent wonder than this recluse of Amherst. To her should be accorded a scrutiny as delicate and keen as that which is given to Jones Very or Emily Brontë or William Blake." 32

The Critic of February, 1895, is another:

"To review Miss Dickinson's letters is like reviewing her poetry; the critic sees that here is something of unquestionable power that may not be labeled off-hand with any of the well-worn phrases that fit most books. In the conventional sense of the

32. "Letters of Emily Dickinson", The Literary World, XXV(Dec.15,1894)p.446
word, artist is not the term that one thinks of applying to Miss Dickinson. She had the Emersonic habit of trying to express her meaning poignantly and letting the rest go. This trait becomes a confused and irritating trait in writers whose meaning is of little worth; in writers of genius it is the startling abruptness of the seer." 33

Poems of Emily Dickinson, Third Series 34 was published in 1896. An excerpt from The Nation will serve to illustrate a growing tolerance as well as a more independent spirit on the part of the critics; also it will furnish another account of her reception in England:

"The Junior editor of Emily Dickinson's poems (Mrs. Mabel Loomis Todd) has been induced by popular interest in previous series to select still a third volume, this being facilitated by the discovery of an unexpected deposit. The curious fame of this author is something unique in literature, being wholly posthumous and achieved without puffing or special effort, and indeed, quite contrary to the expectation of both editors and publishers. No volumes of American poetry, not even the most popular of Longfellow's, have had so wide or so steady a sale. On the other hand, the books met with nothing but vehement hostility and derision on the part of leading English critics, and the sale of the first volume, when reprinted there, did not justify the issue of a second. The sole expressed objection to them, in the English mind, lay in their defects or irregularities of manner; and yet these were not nearly so defiant as those exhibited by Whitman who has always been more unequivocably accepted in England than at home. There is, however, ample evidence that to a minority, at least, of English readers, Emily Dickinson is very dear. Some consideration is also due to the peculiarly American quality of the landscape, the birds, the flowers, she delineates. What does an Englishman know of the bobolink, the whippoorwill, the Baltimore oriole, even of the American robin or blue-jay? These have hardly been recognized as

legitimate stock properties in poetry, either on the part of the London press or of that portion of the American which calls itself 'cosmopolitan.'

It is needless to say that Miss Dickinson's poetry achieves its success in spite of all its flagrant literary faults by what Ruskin describes as 'the perfection and precision of the instantaneous line.' She is to be tested not by her attitude but by her shot. Does she hit the mark? As a rule she does." 35

In summing up the period from 1890 to 1897, then, we might conclude that although the public was ready for her work, the standards of critical taste were, save in a few exceptions, not yet willing to admit her to her proper niche in the Hall of Fame. In contrast to the varied receptions accorded her in the reviews already cited, it might be pertinent to look into an account of sales during these years as submitted by Little, Brown and Company and referred to by Mr. G. F. Whicher in a note to his bibliography of Emily Dickinson:

"Just forty years have passed since the printing of the Poems, but the publisher's report shows a continuous demand and total printing of her various editions in England and America far beyond the general estimate. 'The first edition of Miss Dickinson's Poems, consisting of 500 copies, published November 12, 1890,' writes Mr. Herbert Jenkins, vice-president of Little, Brown and Company, 'was quickly exhausted. The second edition of 380 copies was printed December 11th and the third edition on December 23rd. Down to 1898, Roberts Bros. printed 7850 copies of the 'First Series', and after taking the book over Little, Brown and co., printed 3820 copies down to 1925, when it went out of print. Fifteen or more editions made a total of about 12,000 copies.

The 'Second Series', by the same editors, was published by Roberts Bros. in the autumn of 1891, in an edition of 960 copies. Three more editions of 1000 copies each, were printed during the same year. Roberts Bros. and Little, Brown and Co. printed ten or more editions making a total of about 7500 copies.

An edition of 500 copies of the First and Second Series combined, was published by Roberts Bros. late in the year of 1893. After a second printing of 500 copies in 1895, this edition went out of print.

The Third Series, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, was published in the spring of 1896 in an edition of 1000 copies. An additional 1000 copies were printed on September 21st of the same year. A total of about 3500 copies of this series was printed in three or more editions.

Approximately 50,000 copies of the various volumes of Emily Dickinson's poems have been printed and sold in this country alone since 1890. Also, at least six editions of her work have been published in England.' 36

Certainly there is a surprising lack of correlation between the verdict of the critics in general and the verdict of the public. That Emily Dickinson's popularity within a decade after her death should have exceeded that of Longfellow, furnishes, in view of subsequent estimates, an interesting indictment of Victorian critical standards.

CHAPTER III

It is rather an amazing circumstance that between the years 1897 and 1914, the literary fame of Emily Dickinson should have waned almost to a point where she became as obscure as she had been in life. In Stedman's *An American Anthology* (1900)\(^{37}\), only twenty short poems by her were included, and in George Willis Cooke's volume called *Poets of Transcendentalism* (1903),\(^{38}\) she was not even mentioned. From that time forward, most histories of American Literature either overlooked her entirely or added her name in an appendix. As late as 1914, *The New International Encyclopedia* dismissed her in ten lines, concluding:

"In thought her introspective lyrics are striking but are deficient in form."\(^{39}\)

In 1915, in *A History of American Literature Since 1870*, Professor Fred Lewis Pattee, ordinarily a keen appraiser, wrote this incredible estimate:

"Her poems were mere conceits...colorless and for the most


part, lifeless. They should have been allowed to perish as their author intended." 40

The Encyclopedia Britannica 41 did even less for her than The New International. 42 Until the Thirteenth Edition in 1926, she was not even mentioned, and then only in a cross-reference by way of comparison. She had to wait for the Fourteenth Edition in 1929 for a half-column of appreciation. The Cambridge History of American Literature includes her in the 1921 Edition. In speaking of writers such as Aldrich, Taylor, Stedman, Stoddard, Gilder, Harte, Miller and Riley, it admits that:

"None of these has gained more with time than has Emily Dickinson. Despite her defective sense of form, which makes her a better New Englander than Easterner, she has acquired a permanent following of discriminating readers through her extraordinary insight into the life of the mind and soul."

but concludes with:

"Her place in American letters will be inconspicuous but secure." 43

Several possible reasons present themselves in the form of queries as to why this should have been. Was it because American critics although, as we have seen, they recognized her merit, were still slavishly obsequious to British opinion, and were a bit abashed about extolling an

42. New International Encyclopedia, op. cit.
individual who lacked recognition in the Empire? Was it that the survivors of Puritanism, with its brimstone theology, were still sufficiently predominant to frown conclusively upon the irreverances of one who in a later day was to be described as "essentially religious"?

"She was," says Percy Holmes Boynton, in The New Republic, in 1924, "as essentially religious as poets always are. The religion which she mentioned with irony was something to be put in quotation marks for those who could not catch her nuance for the word. She used it as one who was quick to point the finger of mockery at cant speech or visible sanctimony. We have an example in:

'I know of no choicer ecstasy than to see Mrs. F. roll out in crepe every morning, I presume to intimidate Antichrist.' 44

It might have astounded the Puritan elders of her day, could they have looked forward into a 1924 number of The Bookman and seen her described thus by Stephen Vincent Benét:

"The minatory, fire-eyed God of the white meeting house was never hers. She loved God but she had her own opinion of Him, too....She was very nearly the only person since certain of the saints to treat the Bible and its characters with a certain spontaneous directness that would have delighted St. Francis of Assisi as wholly as it would have desolated Cotton Mather." 45

Was it that the frowns were sufficiently numerous to bring about the decision that she was hardly the proper diet for the young, and that she should, therefore, be excluded from the McGuffey readers. This

makes a rather interesting point. The inclusion of poems such as "The Chambered Nautilus" 46 and "A Psalm of Life" 47 in grammar school readers does familiarize the child during plastic years with the existance if not with the worth of an author, and it is in this way that most American writers slip into the consciousness of the great American public. A superior student in Senior English began a paper on Emily Dickinson not long ago with the petulant query: "Why have I never heard of this woman before?" Why indeed?

Another point suggests itself as to a third reason why Emily Dickinson's work might not have been considered of lasting merit in the late eighteen nineties and in the early nineteen hundreds. In addition to her scrambled form, there was a dearth of "lessons" in her work, and our grandparents loved "lessons", especially when they slipped easily from the tongue. However, she who once wrote, "Be sure to live in vain, dear. I wish I had" 48 in a birthday greeting to a child, could scarcely be looked to for urgings like:

"Build thee more stately mansions O my Soul." 49

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49. O. W. Holmes, "The Chambered Nautilus", op. cit. p.500
"Let us then be up and doing,  
With a heart for any fate;  
Still achieving, still pursuing  
Learn to labor and to wait." 50

Whatever may have been the reason, (and we are inclined to think that all three had a part to play), the fact remains that between 1897 and 1914, there are but five articles on her listed in Mr. George Whicher's Bibliography. 51 One, significantly entitled "Three Forgotten Poetesses", appeared in the March number of The Forum, in 1912, and associated her with Amy Levy and Emma Lazarus. A quotation from it will serve to show the set-back which her reputation had suffered:

"A growing literary custom more and more commemorates those men and women of a past day whose names may be held as nearly immortal as is predictable in the world of letters, but there lies not far beneath this more glorious company a field of what may be called 'secondary literature', which today's 'general reader' all too seldom turns to look back upon....It is in this field that Emily Dickinson and Amy Levy and Emma Lazarus labored out their brief days.

.....He is not far wrong who holds that the voice (Emily Dickinson's) which then fell still yet sounds sweetly enough to be hearkened to today even amid the stronger, deeper tones of greater poets." 52

Another review in The Atlantic Monthly for January, 1913, comments favorably on her, and suggests one of the reasons previously mentioned, for her obscurity:

51. G. F. Whicher, op. cit.
"Although her similes and metaphors may be devoid of languid aesthetic elegance, they are quivering to express living ideas and so they come surprisingly close to what we are fond of calling the commonplace. She reverses the usual, she hitches her star to a wagon, transfusing homely daily phrases for poetic purposes. Such an audacity has seldom invaded poetry with a desire to tell immortal truths through the medium of a deep sentiment for old habitual things. It is true that we permit this liberty to the greatest poets, Shakespeare, Keats, Wordsworth and some others; but in America, our poets have been sharply charged not to offend in this respect. Here tradition still animates many critics in the belief that poetry must have exalted phraseology.

A poet in the deeper, mystic qualities rather than in the external merit of precise rhymes and flawless art, Emily Dickinson's place is among those whose gifts are 'too intrinsic for renown.'" 53

CHAPTER IV

The Single Hound, Poems of a Lifetime, 54 made up of fragments sent at various times to "Sister Sue", her brother Austin's wife, and edited by Emily Dickinson's niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, was published in 1914. At that time, the so-called "New Movement" in American verse was well under way and Emily was hailed enthusiastically as the first of the Moderns. Fully to understand her revival at this time, it might be well to quote a brief review of the period. Louis Untermeyer, in his excellent account of contemporary poetry in American Writers on American Literature, has this to say:

"When the critical historian of American poetry comes to consider the first three decades of the twentieth century, he will, I think, be compelled to record three distinct phases. Since 1900, roundly speaking, the poetry and even the verse-writing of the United States has reflected (1.) a dependence on convention, (2.) a revolt to frank—though often unhappy—experimentation, (3.) a reaction from revolt without formulas or formalism.

At the beginning of the twentieth century in America there was little left of the great poetic tradition—except the tradition. The lyric gods had gone; to apply even the term 'demi-gods' to such minstrels as Charles Warren Stoddard, Richard Watson Gilder, George Parsons Lathrop, C.H.Luders, Frederic Lawrence Knowles, and Cale Young Rice is to inflate the fraction. Emily Dickinson was unknown except to a select (and silent) few; Walt Whitman had scarcely

begun to make an impression on the critics and none whatever on the poets.... It was an unpropitious period for darkly searching poetry, being preeminently, an era of sweetness and light verse. ....The renaissance of American poetry was prepared for in the first years of the twentieth century, but no one was conscious of it until 1912. In that year Miss Harriet Monroe founded Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, the first, and--since it is now in its nineteenth year--the most persisting of contemporary magazines devoted exclusively to poetry. At the same time the submerged concern with 'our first national art' rose to the surface. The metaphor is a feeble one; it would be truer to say that the country was inundated......Not since the days of the New England group had the country been so 'poetry minded'. The difference, moreover, was obvious to the least literary; the New England group was actually a group, coalesced not merely by personal ties but by a common point of view, whereas the new poets had few personal contacts with each other and absolutely no sense of coalition. 'The Back Bay Brahmins' were not only scholars, they were gentlemen in a gentlemanly tradition. The new poets almost made a boast of their inability to finish college, were forced to spend a part of their lives in physical labor, in business offices or struggling with the soil, and were as mixed in race and background as America itself. This mixture made, primarily for vitalizing differences. It provoked a range and diversity unprecedented in the history of American literature; it also made for the rise of strange tendencies, tentative schools and wholly experimental movements. Though many of these were abortive, they purged the body of sentimentality, of rhetorical platitudes and of a dependence on vague generalities.

The rapid eruption of new poets and new ideas, of programs and propaganda--a period of violent controversy--lasted about a decade. The era began with Vachel Lindsay's General William Booth Enters Into Heaven, a high-spirited drum-banging for a new age, and ended significantly with T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land, a funeral march for an old one. During the years 1912-1922 stars waxed and waned; influences interrupted and superseded each other; but, before the next generation began its attack, a period of genuine accomplishment had defined itself.

Appraising that period (1912-1922) today, it might be said that its outstanding characteristic was that of a devotion to actuality. It was not, however, a mere slavish reporting, but a heightening of everyday experiences, an intensification of the
thing which Whitman prophesied, celebrating the 'glory of the commonplace.' " 55

Amy Lowell, the founder of The Imagist movement in America, in an essay, published posthumously in 1930, but probably written earlier, credits Emily Dickinson with the pioneering, and also explains the changing attitude toward her work:

"...She knew no different life, and yet she certainly did not belong to the one in which she found herself. She may have felt this in some obscure fashion; for, little by little she withdrew from the world about her and shut herself up in a cocoon of her own spinning; she never knew that a battle was on and that she had been selected for a place in the vanguard; all she could do was to retire, to hide her wounds, to carry out her little skirmishings and advance in by-ways, slowly winning a territory which the enemy took no trouble to dispute. What she did seemed insignificant and individual, but thirty years after her death the flag under which she fought had become a great banner, the symbol of a militant revolt. It is an odd story, this history of Imagism, and perhaps the oddest and saddest moment in it is comprised in the struggle of this one brave, fearful and unflinching woman...Her circle loved her, but utterly failed to comprehend. Her daring utterances shocked; her whimsicality dazed. The account of this narrow life is heart rending.

....When her first volume was published posthumously, it went through six editions in as many months.

The truth is that, as some one once said to me, the average man is a good deal above the average. A fact which the newly awakened interest in poetry is proving every day. This same first edition was published in 1890, more than twenty years before Imagism as a distinct school was heard of,—but its reception shows that the soil was already ripe for sowing.

They bothered the critics dreadfully, these original, impossible poems, where form was utterly disregarded but where some-

how effects were got surprisingly well without it. Mr. Higginson
shuddered and admired it in equal proportions, but he came out
nobly in praise (with reservation) in the preface to the first
dition....

Thanks to Mr. Higginson, some of my work has already been done
for me. He has told us that this is a poetry of 'flashes', there­
fore it must be extremely concentrated; he says that it is wholly
original, so it must give free rein to individualistic freedom of
idea; he thinks that it exhibits 'an extraordinary vividness of
description and imaginative power', which is merely to restate the
third and fourth Imagist canons in other words. What else is left?
Simplicity and directness of speech perhaps. For that we had better
seek our answer in the poems themselves, remembering that Mrs. Todd
specifically says that 'a particular order of words might not be
sacrificed to anything extrinsic'.

".....'She was not daily bread,' says her niece, 'she was star­
dust.' Do we eat stars more readily than we did then? I think we
do, and if so, it is she who has taught us to appreciate them." 56

What Miss Lowell says is fortified by a quotation from Miss Harriet
Monroe's review of The Single Hound in the December, 1914, issue of her
Magazine of verse.

"Emily Dickinson, New England spinster of the nineteenth century,
was an unconscious and uncatalogued 'Imagist'. She had the visual
imagination, the love of economy in line and epithet, the rigorous
austerity of style, and the individual subtlety of rhythm, demanded
by the code of contemporary poets who group themselves under that
title. Born a Puritan, her shy soul brooded upon the abstract, but
her wildly rebellious pagan imagination at once transmuted the ab­
stract into the concrete, gave it form and color." 57

57. H(arriet)M(onroe), "The Single Hound", Poetry, V(December, 1914),
p. 138.
Again in Miss Sargent's review in The New Republic, we have a reflection of the change in attitude, as well as an indication that all her 'faults' had suddenly become virtues:

"'Criticism is timid', writes Emerson. 'When shall we dare to say only that is poetry which cleanses and mans me?' The Single Hound is poetry of this tonic sort, and—though the lifetime it records ended nearly thirty years ago—throws a searching light on the revolutionary volumes of 1915. For starkness of vision, 'quintessentialness of expression', boldness and solidity of thought, and freedom of form, a New England spinster who flourished between 1830 and 1886 in an elm-shaded college town above the Connecticut valley, might give the imagists 'pointers': here is a discovery to quicken the modern New England heart. To this day in western Massachusetts, Sundays are almost Sabbaths, 'ministers' almost men of awe, and Longfellow is almost a great poet. Where then, in the golden age of "Evangeline" and the Congregational Church, did Emily Dickinson get her daring inspiration?

Certainly she did not go abroad for it, but dug it out of her native granite. To me she is one of the rarest flowers the sterner New England ever bore and justifies the stiff-necked Puritan elders from whom we all sprang." 58

Enthusiasm for the so-called "discovery" did not wane with the termination of the review period for The Single Hound. In an almost ecstatic article on Emily Dickinson in The Dial of August, 1918, Marsden Hartley makes these remarks:

"When I want poetry in its most delightful mood I take up the verses of that remarkable girl of the sixties and seventies, Emily Dickinson—she who was writing her little worthless poetic nothings (or so she was wont to think them) at a time when the now classical New England group was flourishing near Concord, when Hawthorne was burrowing into the soul of things, when Thoreau was refusing

to make more pencils and was sounding lake bottoms and holding converse with all kinds of fish and other water life, and when Emerson, standing high upon his pedestal, was preaching of compensations, of friendship, of society, and of the oversoul.

Emily Dickinson has by no means lost her freshness for us; she wears as would an old-fashioned pearl set in gold and dark enameled. One feels as if one were sunning in the discal radiance of a bright, vivid, and really new type of poet. For with her cheery impertinence she offsets the smugness of the time in which she lived.

......Emily Dickinson confronts you at once with an instinct for poetry to be envied by the more ordinary and perhaps more finished poets.

......I shall always want to read Emily Dickinson, for she points her finger at all tiresome scholasticism, and takes a chance with the universe about her and the first poetry it offers at every hand, within the eye's easy glancing. She has made poetry memorable as a pastime for the mind, and sent the heavier ministerial tendencies flying to a speedy oblivion." 59

As a matter of fact, her reputation may be said to have increased steadily until in 1922, it reached what was considered a surprising height in Conrad Aiken's statement in the preface to his anthology, Modern American Poets:

"I cannot conceal my feeling that Emily Dickinson is one of the most remarkable of American poets, and that her poetry is perhaps the finest, by a woman, in the English language." 60

Remembering the hostility of earlier British criticism, it is interesting to note the same change in Martin Armstrong's article in the

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January, 1923, issue of The Spectator:

"Emily Dickinson is difficult to criticize. At her best she writes poems which are quite perfect. But on the flawless poet, detached from date or personal idiosyncracy, the little New England spinster is perpetually intruding with her charming, narrowly dated yet humorous Quakerishness. It creeps out in the 'No Sir, in thee!' of the Oriole poem... and again in such phrases as 'You cannot fold a flood and put it in a drawer', or 'The Twilight stood as strangers do, with hat in hand.' Frequently, too, in a conventional stanzaic form she will suddenly dismay you by dropping out the rhyme so that the expected effect falls dead like a fiddle-string which suddenly slackens and goes flat. How far this is calculated it is difficult to say; the fact remains that as we grow familiar with her poetry in the aggregate these imperfections come to seem things appropriate and attractive, just as an imperfection of accent or awkwardness of gesture becomes an added charm in a charming personality... Emily Dickinson would gain enormously by careful selection. I have no doubt that a volume of selected poems 61 would reveal the fact that her poetry, as Mr. Conrad Aiken in his recent anthology of Modern American Poets claims is 'perhaps the finest, by a woman in the English language'. I quarrel only with his 'perhaps'." 62

61. It might be noted here that possibly in answer to this suggestion, Mr. Aiken did edit a volume called Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson, published in London in 1925.

CHAPTER V

The reclaiming of Emily Dickinson by the "Moderns" had proved so thorough that in 1924, her popularity was great enough to warrant the publication of two very important volumes, one *Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by her niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, and including, in addition to those of the earlier volumes, the contents of *The Single Hound*; the other, *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* also by Mrs. Bianchi. The first was significant because the earlier editions were by this time the pride of collectors and hence were not available to the general public. The second was important in that it was the first biography of the poetess, was written, apparently, to stem the prevailing legends regarding Emily's love affair, and called attention to the depth and charm of a highly unique personality, thus insuring a clearer understanding of her poetry. Also it arranged the correspondence in a chronological order instead of by recipients as Mrs. Todd's edition had done. One is thus able to follow the unfolding of her spirit in its natural sequence.

64. M.D. Bianchi, *op. cit.*
The reviews following both publications emphasize the personality, and restate the position which her reputation had achieved.

Conrad Aiken, for example, is found to go even farther in his estimate of her worth:

"We are perhaps justified in considering her the most perfect flower of New England Transcendentalism. In her mode of life she carried the doctrine of self-sufficient individualism farther than Thoreau carried it, or the naive zealots of Brook Farm. In her poetry she carried it, with its complement of passionate moral mysticism, farther than Emerson, which is to say that as a poet she had more genius than he...Her genius was, it remains to say, as erratic as it was brilliant. Her disregard for accepted forms or for regularities was incorrigible....Ultimately one simply sighs at Miss Dickinson's singular perversity, her lapses and tyrannies, and accepts them as an inevitable part of the strange and original genius she was. The lapses and tyrannies become a positive charm—one even suspects they were deliberate. They satisfied her—therefore they satisfy us. This marks, of course, our complete surrender to her highly individual gift, and to the singular sharp beauty, present everywhere of her personality. The two things cannot be separated; and together one must suppose they suffice to put her among the finest poets in the language." 65

Esther Murphy, reviewing Life and Letters in The New York Herald Tribune says:

"If her wishes had been obeyed, her poetry would have been destroyed after death. That her family made a wise choice and earned the gratitude of the world by disregarding her wishes, there can be no doubt, any more than there can be a doubt about her genius." 66

and Ethel Parton in The Outlook comments:

"Life and Letters appears at a time, forty years after Emily's

death, when not only is the fame to which she was indifferent securely established, but she is accorded a higher rank than ever before and there is a marked revival of interest in her work and character both in England and America."  

Professor Boynton's review in *The New Republic* for June, 1924, emphasizes a point too seldom noted:

"The poems as the world can read them are not half so rare as the gay personality behind them. She wrote her little nephew, 'Mother told me when I was a boy that I must turn over a new leaf. I call that the foliage admonition'; but if Mother's admonition was intended to make the errant child more serious and literal, it was wasted. Though she entered the cloister, she took her gaiety along with her piety, and she kept it to the end."  

Another point, that she might have been as great a prose writer as a poet, is brought out by Stephen Vincent Benét in *The Bookman* for August, 1924:

"The wreath that would have been a little too notorious for her preference when she lived, she has now--the seldom given--and after much misunderstanding and a deal of fable, the lamp of immortality burns with a sure light. Time cannot diminish, but only makes more apparent what she had and did not claim. She may never be a universally popular poet--her thought has burrs for the lazy--but she will always be a great one; and the fact that she might have been among the finest prose writers of her time is definitely revealed in this biography....

For those who are interested in American poetry or indeed in the best poetry at all, the *Life and Letters* should be an indispensable book--and not for them alone. The internal history of

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an extraordinary soul is there, and souls come somewhat infrequently even in our times." 69

John Gould Fletcher, in The Saturday Review of Literature, for August 30, 1924, sums up her status:

"She has become, nearly forty years after her death, inevitably 'the greatest woman poet of the English language'; she who humbly admired the work of 'Ik Marvel', of Dr. Holland, of Helen Hunt Jackson, of Col. Higginson and other forgotten worthies remains to delight the elect and to move the envy of 'Ik Marvels' of the future. Such is the way of the world. Her own attitude to such matters is concise and exact:

'When we have ceased to crave
The gift is given.' " 70

Miss Genevieve Taggard has a paragraph along these same lines in her review in The Nation for October of the same year:

"Poor Emily who could not write like Lowell and Longfellow! She could not. She wrote in secret, for herself alone, and now we find her, in the company of the maddest and most realistic men, Blake, Shakespeare, and Browning." 71

That the reputation of Emily Dickinson had been augmented to amazing proportions, is indicated by the fact that she who had been completely ignored in volumes such as Cooke's Poets of Transcendentalism, in 1903 was given an entire chapter in Clement Wood's Poets of America 72

in 1925. That her vogue survived and outshone the "Free Verse" period is attested to by Edward Sapir's review entitled: "Emily Dickinson, A Primitive," in Poetry for May, 1925. Conrad Aiken had surprised the critics with his famous statement in 1922. Here we find those words reduced almost to an understatement with Mr. Sapir's contention that we are not yet capable of estimating her merit or her influence. This seems as significant a review as that of Howells in an earlier age. It is therefore necessary to quote at length:

"There is some brush-clearing to be done before we can see her true significance. It is customary to speak of her work as a forerunner of the contemporary spirit of American verse, if such a spirit there be. It would be far more to the point to describe it as the forerunner of a spirit that has not yet succeeded in shaping itself. In the wiser chronology of the future history of American literature, she is likely to be counted the spiritual successor, and possibly destroyer of our belated romantics, cerebralists, and vendors of 'jeweled bindings.'

This may seem an unnecessarily tall program for a slender woman who wrote verse but furtively and with a painful lack of ease, but it is not half so arduous as it sounds. Emily Dickinson's distinction and importance lie in the groove of her superficial limitations. She was not in the 'swim' of anything, she had but casual contacts with the culture of her day; and above all, an unhappy love experience shut her in for the whole period of her creative life within the austere halls of a passionate spirit. She gained solitude, and held on to a despair that was linked to joy by their common ecstasy. Hence all her poems, the very poorest with the fine and beautiful ones are protected from the slightest alloy of sham. Where she failed—and she failed or only half succeeded perhaps as often as she won through to complete expression—it was never because her vision was unsure, but over and over again because she had no tools ready to hand. Yet so ardent was her spirit that an almost comic
gaucherie in the finding of rhymes could not prevent her from discovering to us the promise of a fresh, primitive and relentless school of poetry that is still on the way.

This primitive school may be detected in occasional poems or lines or images among our contemporary poets, chiefly among the lesser known names: it has certainly found no commanding voice. In order to understand it in even the vaguest way, it is necessary to do a little more brush-clearing that more competent critics may be trusted to do in more circumstantial detail. The American Poetic Renaissance, as we are sadly beginning to discover, is as yet no true re-birth but merely a strange medley of discordant voices. The Walt Whitman tradition, contrary to the usual critical formula, is not a vital one for poetry, and has probably done us at least as much harm as good. It is valuable in so far as it has cleared away the literary detritus that clogged sincere expression; but its frantic attempt to find the soul in anything but the soul itself, its insistence on the mystic beauty of an externalized world, and above all, its maudlin idealization of democracy could not but lead to the demoralization of the poetic values. So far from combating the materialistic ideal, it has fed it by vainly attempting to read spirit into it. The results have been disastrous. Poetry has become externalized, and the intuitive hunger of the soul for the beautiful moulding of experience, actually felt, not fiddled with or stared at is not often stilled. The bulk of contemporary poetry, with its terrifying high average of excellence, gives us everything but the ecstasy that is the language of unhampered, intuitive living. We have shrewd observation, fantasy, the vivid life of the senses, pensive grace, eloquence, subtle explorations of the intellect and a great many other interesting things, but curiously little spiritual life.

.....Emily Dickinson was able to discover herself because she was powerfully assisted by two negations. She drank very sparingly, as we have seen, of the stream of literary culture, and she was somehow unaware of the fact that we are living in a material age......If we turn to the best of Emily Dickinson's poems, we find the fruits of her healthy ignorance in a strange, unsought and almost clairvoyant freshness....In short, her poetry leads straight to the conception of an intuitively felt spirit which can be subordinated neither to any of its experienced forms nor to any kind of absolute standing without. As she
puts it:

'There is solitude of space,
A solitude of sea,
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site,
That polar privacy
A Soul admitted to Itself:
Finite Infinity.'  "73

The opening paragraph of Willem Van Doorn's article in English Studies (Amsterdam) will serve to illustrate the European attitude toward her:

"Passing by some minor forces like Bret Harte, Lowell and Riley, who in a way were more 'American' than Whitman himself, because they used dialect in their poems, I now come to a very remarkable woman, who never courted publicity and fame in her life time, and whose poems were published four years after her death." 74

An article on her also appeared in Revue des Deux Mondes a bit later. One line will show the "modern" French attitude:

"...ces poems dans la brusquerie des images, l'audace des expressions ont une fraicheur singulière." 75

Aside from the fact that the publication of Life and Letters 76 had the effect of increasing public interest in Emily Dickinson's

76. M. D. Bianchi, op. cit.
poetry and personality, it had one other result—a rather important one in view of later developments. The rather meager details given out by Mme. Bianchi with regard to Emily's love affair and her retirement stirred the critics to know more and to say so. This precipitated a battle which was to be somewhat drawn out and which was to transfer a bulk of the interest in the poetess to a rather gossipy preoccupation with the woman. In other words, the back stairs came in for their share of treading, and while she became still better known as a result, it seems rather unfortunate that this should have been the case.

On August 2, 1924, a letter from Martha Dickinson Bianchi appeared in The Saturday Review of Literature. Excerpts from it will serve to show the beginnings of contention:

"Certain critics of my recently published life of my aunt, Emily Dickinson, have accused me of covering up significant facts, drawing the curtain on scenes that the public had a right to witness, of 'calmly ignoring whole swathes of important crises.' Those 'whole swathes of important crises' calmly ignored by her neglectful biographer, Emily herself declares 'occurred to her alone.'

The thirst for 'particulars' in regard to Emily's love story reminds one maliciously of Mrs. Poyser, who confessed she 'always turned over to the end to see what they died of and if their legs swelled.' That Emily loved, was loved, went on loving, in spite of time or separation is too difficult, too natural, too noble perhaps for the prevalent emotional agility of our day to comprehend.

......There may be many essays written about her and her work, --it is eagerly to be hoped there may be--but no other life save
her own as she lived it can ever be truthfully written. Those 'important crises' in the life of the Amherst poet exist solely in the curiosity of the unimaginative, from whom Emily’s spirit seems to run in death as her feet would have fled them in life, and who fail to conceive that

"The soul selects her own society
Then shuts the door."

....Her own notion of 'the pursuit of happiness' seems not to appeal to those from whom she differs, and all the worst about her appears to remain that there was no worst to exploit. It is disappointing to admit there was no jealously guarded mystery, no scandal, no vulgarity, nothing sensational. It was all helplessly true and simple and mighty. It is too bad of genius to behave like this—to present no spectacle to such as crave 'to exchange portentous inference.' "77

That Mme. Bianchi's retort was inadequate to stifle the aroused interest is apparent in subsequent reviews. Miss Genevieve Taggard's in The Nation of October 8, 1924, has much to say:

"Reticence, good taste, Amherst sensibilities—all the forces that stifled and warped the living girl, are here again, silencing the events of her life and destroying her letters, as perfect in many instances as her poems. I have merely to refer the reader to the 1894 edition of the letters and certain passages in the later chapters of this volume to illustrate Mme. Bianchi's shortcomings. As to the maltreatment of the poetry in the past, let anyone compare the facsimile reproduction of Renunciation in Poems: Second Series with the printed version, in that series edited at the request of her sister Lavinia by Higginson and Todd. In every instance this freshest of spring water has had to come through the filter of common and cloudy minds." 78

French interest in the reasons for Emily's withdrawl from the world, were indicated by an article in Revue Anglo-Americaine, in June, 1925,

by Jean Catel. Here an attempt to investigate the problem is attempted from a psychological standpoint, but the writer finally admits that the biographical data are insufficient:

"On devine qu'une pieuse et regretable reticence nous voile l'essentiel." 79

Charles K. Trueblood in his review of Life and Letters, in The Dial for April, 1926, gives us a rather convincing argument for the other side of the controversy:

"Adjustment to one's world is generally thought to consist either of remaking oneself or of remaking the world. But it seemed that she did neither, she moved to a brilliant and subtle solitude leagues within.

Her shrinking was no gesture. It became an avoidance and a flight. Her involuntary reluctance grew with reiteration into deliberate escape. It passed into gossip, and from gossip into legend, in which it became sufficiently fantastic, one gathers, to furnish reason for an authoritative biography. ... The Ivory Tower aspect of her seclusion is perfectly intelligible as a refinement on the general world, as a preservation of treasures of feeling from an excess of irrelevance, as a great factor, no doubt, in contribution to the purity and flowering of her rare poetic instinct." 80

and Allan Tate, himself a poet, presents a very searching view of the same side in The Outlook of August 15, 1928:

"The emphasis which the criticism of Miss Dickinson has placed upon the enigma of her personal life is a legitimate interest but on the personal plane only, and not because she wrote poetry; it

is legitimate in the sense that speculation upon the life of John Doe is legitimate. It will never give up the key to her verse; used for that end, the interest is false. It is reasonable, of course, to suppose that her love affair made her a recluse, but there is a great disjunction between what her seclusion produced and what brought it about; it is quite as reasonable to suppose that another experience of another kind might have brought her the same result.

The meaning of her seclusion is the problem we must keep in mind—the meaning of her decision (it must have been deliberate, or deliberately observed by her) to withdraw to her upstairs room and spend her best years imposing her own flashing constructions upon a dimly explored real world. The fact that it must have been her only way of acting out her part in the history of her culture, which made a single demand in various ways upon all of its representatives—this is the greatest consequence.....Her life was one of the richest ever lived out on this continent. She is one of the few Americans who have realized themselves. For when she went upstairs and closed the door she mastered life by rejecting it. The love affair was incidental, a kind of pretext; she would have found another.....Her poetry invites at least ten years of devoted and wide-spread critical discussion. It may yet receive it. The beginnings are scarcely made. She needs a tradition of criticism and in the absence one must be contented to guess." 81

That the quarrel died down somewhat may be seen in other articles previous to 1929. For example, little of the controversy but much of understanding may be found in Professor Rollo Walter Brown's article called "A Sublimated Puritan", in The Saturday Review of Literature in October, 1928:

"She achieved freedom....Thomas Bailey Aldrich could find 'only intermittent flashes of imagination' in her, and thought her admirers had mistaken a simple New England bluebird for a nightingale. But as it became more and more fashionable to seek freedom—-even though somewhat rapaciously—it became easier to see

81. Allan Tate, "Emily Dickinson", The Outlook, CXLIX(August 15, 1928), pp. 622-623.
how she had been, and is, and for long will continue to be a source of faith for those who would find the fullest intensity and highest honesty of their own spirits.

It was a world worth making for oneself—and others. Things in that world were transubstantiated into pure poetry, pure significance. We have now come to believe that it was a romantic world. Something that refuses to become sentimentality, yet something that even the disillusioned think upon as aromatic as old lavender, clings to the story of the slight little woman who secluded herself for a quarter of a century or more, and then quietly slipped from the earth, leaving the old mahogany bureau full of poems that were some day to gladden thousands of understanding hearts. But for the soul that had to save itself from both Puritanism and Puritanism's antipathy, and that had to resist being warped into something resentful and ugly by a practical society, it was more than old lavender; it was myrrh and it was hysop." 82

CHAPTER VI

In March, 1929, a volume called *Further Poems of Emily Dickinson*, was published. It was edited by Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson and bore the subtitle "Withheld from Publication By Her Sister Lavinia." The story was that after Lavinia's death, her papers as well as Emily's were packed in trunks and stowed away in the attic, and that there Mme. Bianchi had found the package of poems. That Lavinia should assume the role of villainess in this particular act of the drama, seems a bit out of line with Mrs. Mabel Loomis Todd's point in the *Harper* article, that it was to Lavinia that we owe our gratitude for our possession of Emily's work.

Whatever the circumstances of the case were, the publication had two distinct results. It served to bring about a renewed interest in her work and numerous re-statements of her importance as a poet--(in fact although there was some little adverse criticism, the bulk of it went somewhat farther in its praise than had that which followed the volumes of 1924.). In addition, the fact that it included several love poems, had the effect of fanning interest in Emily's personal history and of rekindling the indignation of the critics with regard to the reticence,

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Louis Untermeyer speaks thus:

"In spite of four thousand singing years, antiquity and modernity have combined to establish only four women poets of the first rank. Greece produced one...the medieval world, against a gallery of troubadours and minnesingers, evoked one woman's saintly and indubitable voice. Germany could summon none, Russia none, France none. Until this generation England and America could name but three women whose poetry had a speech, though little more than a speech in common. The first of these--first in the esteem of her contemporaries--is already one with the Mid-Victorian wax-flowers of which so much of her verse seems composed...This leaves Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson.

These hitherto unprinted treasures compose Emily Dickinson's most beautiful and from every standpoint, most important book. Here again, but more brilliantly realized, are the rapid ascent of images and the sudden swoop of immensities, the keen epithet that cuts to the deepest layer of consciousness and the paradox on whose point innumerable angels dance....The buried ms. has become a living monument. Had Emily Dickinson been unknown until the publication of Further Poems, and had she written nothing but this one book, she would have to be reckoned with among the indisputably major poets. Frail in build, fine in texture, hers is 'the colossal substance of immortality.'" 85

and Mark Van Doren as follows:

"She is so much the best of women poets, and comes so near the crown of all poetry whatsoever, that her art--being in the very nature of the case somewhat mysterious, has been little talked about, and that little feebly. I shall be feeble, too, in talking about it, but at least I shall recognize that she is an artist, and not discuss her as a New England woman, a cloistered soul, an intense and trembling stoic, or lover of birds and bees.

My point in general is that she wrote with brains, as all

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good poets do, and that she is to be appreciated in the brain or not at all. Wit is the word, I think, that sums Emily Dickinson up—and we must go back through several centuries of usage to find its full content. In the 17th century it meant the point at which imagination and idea, passion and understanding, experience and form meet in good poetry,—it meant, in short, good poetry. Emily Dickinson had wit in one of the richest combinations that I know of, and therefore, I call her one of the best poets. 86

Robert Hillyer in *The Atlantic Monthly* for April, 1929, comments on her place in literature:

"Her work is gradually being recognized as the most interesting poetry America has produced."

and goes on to inquire:

"Is it positive that the packet of poems was secreted by Lavinia, and if so, was the elder sister the only one who withheld? The poem on p. 43, "I never felt at home below" was shown to me eight years ago (not by the editor of the present volume) with the remark that it had been thought too bold to publish. Perhaps we may hope as times enlarge, for yet further discoveries." 87

Babette Deutsch in the May, 1929, issue of *The Bookman* is more impatient on this latter point:

"It is high time, a hundred years after her birth, to put away the shroud that, however tenderly draped, serves but to obscure the serene dignity of the naked brow. One is reminded of Emily's own outburst against the granite nothingness that kept her from her lover, beginning

'I had not minded walls'

and ending

'A limit like the veil

Unto the lady's face,
But every mesh a citadel
And dragons in the crease!

One prays for St. George. It is not every generation, it is not every century, even, that poets of Emily Dickinson's calibre are to be met with. One wants, how urgently, to sweep away the last cobweb and confront the delicate lady who can report her journey to a distant part of the universe." 88

In the Summer issue of The Yale Review, Conrad Aiken reiterates his earlier estimate of Emily and also registers a complaint:

"Emily Dickinson has been rapidly taking her place as one of the very finest of American poets; and it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that whether as literary event or as hidden addition to American literature, there is no other poet, save perhaps, Poe, the discovery of unknown work by whom could be more genuinely exciting. If we add to this the fact that this new work by Emily Dickinson is on a level with her finest, and consistently so, we face at once the realization that this book is inevitably the most significant contribution to American letters which will be published this year.....

But as to the manner in which these new poems have been 'discovered' and edited. On the first point, especially when one considers that there has been a good deal of rather disquieting rumor as to the existence of much unpublished material (a rumor which goes back many years), the editors are exceedingly vague. One cannot help feeling that neither Emily nor her public has been fairly treated." 89

Mr. Aiken then goes into a lengthy questioning of the manner in which the editing of the poems has been done. Among others who had the

89. Conrad Aiken, "Emily Dickinson and Her Editors", Yale Review, XVIII (Summer, 1929), p. 796.
same complaint to make were F. C. Prescott and G. R. Elliot in American Literature. The latter was also among the few remaining critics who were unwilling to admit the star's magnitude. He says:

"When transcendent smartness shall go out of fashion again, many of Emily's verses will go with it." 

CHAPTER VII

In 1930, the hundreth anniversary of the birth of Emily Dickinson was celebrated. As Edmund Blunden, in The Nation and Athenæum (London) for March, 1930, says:

"A hundred years since Emily Dickinson was born; impossible! To those who know her, the most living, contemporary, mockingly future of poets, this chronological fact is a little dust blown, by the wind; and 'to celebrate her centenary' would sound like a parade of Ruritanian generals saluting a snowdrop. Yet the occasion will serve as well as any other to point out that—there is Emily Dickinson." 92

The occasion also served to bring us the publication of three biographies: Emily Dickinson: The Human Background of Her Poetry,93 by Josephine Pollitt, The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson,94 by Genevieve Taggard, Emily Dickinson Friend and Neighbor,95 by MacGregor Jenkins. In the same year appeared a novel called Emily96 by MacGregor Jenkins, Allison's House,97 a prize-winning drama based on her story by

Susan Glaspell, the amplified edition of the hitherto incomplete Complete Poems and chapters by Matthew Josephson and Amy Lowell, as well as some hundred shorter appraisals.

The effect of all these, as it had been in previous years, was to amplify popular interest in Miss Dickinson's work. Also, as in former instances, it had the result of intensifying to a fever heat the old quarrel as to whether or not the public had a right to the facts of the writer's life.

Two accounts of what had happened were already in circulation before Miss Pollitt's work came out. According to local tradition Emily had been in love with a certain eligible young man but had been prevented from marrying him by her father's refusal to give his consent. According to Mme. Bianchi, she had fallen in love with "a Philadelphia preacher" while still unaware that he was married and on learning the truth had renounced him and had subsequently withdrawn herself from the world. Then Miss Pollitt named the preacher as Dr. Charles Wadsworth, but launched another candidate, Major Hunt, engineer and soldier, and the husband of Helen Fiske, Emily's life-long friend, later known as Helen Hunt Jackson. Mr. Jenkins' work was scarcely a biography; it was rather a very pleasant group of reminiscences of childhood, when he had played with Austin Dickinson's children and had known the inimitable

Aunt Emily. Its merit was that it helped to counteract the impression that Emily was an eccentric and melancholy recluse. This was followed almost immediately by Genevieve Taggard's work in which, in addition to giving a very splendid interpretation of the poetic temperament in New England, seventy years ago, Miss Taggard maintained that the lover was a certain George Gould, a student at Amherst and a friend of Austin's. The fact that Emily's father disapproved and succeeded in restraining his daughter from marrying, places the emphasis of the volume on Mr. Dickinson, whom Miss Taggard identifies as the chief reason for Emily's retirement.

It was natural that all these conflicting theories should have been discussed in numerous reviews. It was natural too that indignation toward Mme. Bianchi (who incidentally had withheld permission to use any material from former volumes) should have been repeated much more sharply. The case is stated rather simply in The New York Herald Tribune for (March 2, 1930) in a review of Miss Pollitt's book by George F. Whicher:

"It should be said at once that the unaccountable silence of one who might speak with authority and the speaking out of many who might well have kept silent have contributed about equally to attract more attention to Emily Dickinson's thwarted love than it
deserves. To its possible significance as a background for a certain group of her poems there has been added the factitious interest in an unsolved puzzle." 99

In reviewing Miss Taggard's work in the same paper on June 22, 1930, Mr. Whicher says much more petulantly,

"It was not in Emily Dickinson's nature to complain of the fate that kept her virtually a prisoner in her father's house, and in so doing set her spirit free to scrutinize life, love, nature, time and eternity. But others may complain on her behalf that the same stupid destiny should pursue her writings nearly half a century after 'she has passed out of record into renown.' Her poems, about two-thirds of those that survive; and her letters, all that her family wished to have known, have been twice edited and are under suspicion of having been edited twice too much. Two lives have been published, both open to serious objection. We are offered the ironic spectacle of a major American poet deeded to the public like a park surrounded by iron palings, and the public told to be grateful for what can be seen through the fence. It is grateful—to Emily and to her sister, Lavinia, who so devotedly urged that every line of Emily's poetry be printed; but it would like to know further how long it will be before Emily's 'letter to the world' can reach its destination." 100

In The Nation, for March, 1930, Granville Hicks reviewing Miss Pollitt's book, says:

"The proprietary attitude of Mrs. Martha Dickinson Bianchi toward Emily Dickinson and her poems has been both objectionable and unwise. In particular, her reticence regarding Emily's lover and her careful drawing of attention to that reticence have been a little stupid." 101

and Babette Deutsch in The New Republic for May 7, 1930, remarks:

"The facts which it was either not proper or not necessary to publish during her lifetime should, at this date, be known to all who care for that subtle, witty, and independent spirit. The persistent effort to becloud those facts has naturally resulted in rather wild speculations, some of them more damaging to Emily's character than any statement of the truth could be." 102

Shortly afterward, in reviewing Genevieve Taggard's work, Granville Hicks becomes more explosive and writes what might be considered a new high point in the old disputation:

"One's attention comes back in the end to Mrs Bianchi. The situation is this: apparently less than half of Emily Dickinson's poems have been published; those that have been published have been edited arbitrarily and perhaps stupidly; important facts regarding her life have been concealed. This is a situation so appalling as to be almost ridiculous. Here is America's greatest poet, and here is a large and appreciative audience for her poetry placed entirely at the mercy of a woman who, much evidence goes to show, is unworthy of such a responsibility. In countries whose inhabitants are both demonstrative and more deeply concerned about literature than we, there would be riots and mass meetings. In the United States we calmly invite Mrs. Bianchi to be the principal speaker at centennial celebrations." 103

The battle over facts raged in review after review, with the critics acidulous on the one hand and Mme. Bianchi completely unmoved or impotent, as the case may be, on the other. Then, with the Saturday Review of Literature as a field, something like a decision was reach-

103. Granville Hicks, "Mystery and Mystification", The Nation, CXXX (June 25, 1930), p. 736.
ed in two articles, one suggesting a solution by Louis Untermeyer and the other confirming that solution, by Emily's old friend and early editor, Mabel Loomis Todd.

Untermeyer's article appeared on July 5, 1930, and gives in addition to his suggestion, an intimation of Emily Dickinson's reputation in 1930:

"Emily's first editors, the cosmopolite T. W. Higginson, and the more perceptive and painstaking Mabel Loomis Todd, presented her poems—her posthumous 'letter to the world'—with little comment and certain dubious editorial changes...They gave no hint of the man (unnamed by Emily) to whom the poet, among apostrophes to bees, railroads, and eternity, addressed some of the greatest love poems ever written.

Somewhat later (in The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson, 1924) her niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, in an effort to stem gossip, made the mistake of telling a vague story vaguely and thus swelled the gathering flood of conjecture.

Six years after Mme. Bianchi's volume, Emily Dickinson's centennial was celebrated by warring articles, contradictory chapters, and a trio of biographers at complete variance with one another... The sad and absurd mingle of these volumes! And something more significant. The stature of the poet tends to dwindle into a puzzle about the person; so lengthy a concern about the man and the 'mystery' in her life obscures the mastery of her work. 'Surgeons must be very careful when they take the knife,' says Emily, a sentiment which Miss Taggard quotes.

Miss Pollitt, in a great effort to show Emily's obsession with Hunt, whose profession was soldiering, prepares a list of military and geographical terms. Miss Taggard, with equal seriousness and industry, catalogues some two hundred words supposedly legal in origin to emphasize the domination of her lawyer father. This way folly lies. It would not be difficult to plot the curve of a devotional vocabulary pointing to ministerial preoccupations, or compile an imposing array of horticultural terms to prove she was
in love with the (as yet unnamed) town gardener.

.....All these theories are, of course, possible. But there are others equally plausible. Has anyone, for example, suggested there was no love-story at all--none that is, in the sense of mutual 'rapport'?....But since it lacked wildness, it will not be part of the legend.

Thus the outer--and less significant. The poetry, the exposed heart, has another beat for us today. Emily Dickinson's work, independent of her legend, having gone through periods of mystification and patronization, is now entering a stage of sanctification...After the years of neglect, one can sympathize with the over-compensatory breathlessness. But are there to be no reservations?

.....A critical appraisal does not have to be a condemnatory one, but it must steer a course between the early ridicule and the present adulation. It must disclose the fact--now being grudgingly accepted--that Emily's work was not a spontaneous and perfect creation, but the labor of a craftsman and, as such, subject to the laborer's limitations....And yet, it is a tough and poetry-resisting soul which does not eventually succumb to her rhetoric, irregularities and all. Her vivacity covers self-consciousness and carries off her self-contradictions; her swift condensations--surpassed by no writer of any age--win the most reluctant. One gasps at the way she packs huge ideas into an explosive quatrains...

What else then matters? Street numbers are only for the literary statistician and names are unimportantly interchangeable. Whatever the provocation, all that remains is the poetry. His name may be Wadsworth or Hunt or Gould or Legion, but it is not he who is immortalized in her book; it is Emily." 104

Mabel Loomis Todd in her review of The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson, 105 on September 6th, 1930, confirms Mr. Untermeyer's statement:

105. Genevieve Taggard, op. cit.
"Of Emily's pitiful little love story, the public will be more inclined to accept Miss Taggard's explanation than those offered by others writers. But what of it? As Louis Untermeyer rightly says in the Saturday Review of Literature of July 5, 1930, 'names are unimportantly interchangeable....it is Emily.'

Louis Untermeyer, in the article above referred to says with real perception, 'Has anyone suggested there was no love story at all--none that is, etc.........' I long ago answered that question. In the preface to Poems:Second Series, I wrote: 'She lived in seclusion from no love disappointment. Her life was the normal blossoming of a nature introspective to a high degree! ' And in Letters of Emily Dickinson, 1894, I said further: 'Most of us would require some sudden blow, some fierce crisis, etc....No far-away and dramatic explanation of her quiet life is necessary to those who, are capable of apprehending her.'

Thus in the first account of Emily's life prepared under the scrutiny and with the sanction of Austin and Lavinia, her only brother and only sister, published only eight years after her death, the reader will find Mr. Untermeyer's theory fully and finally sanctioned. Here is fact, not conjecture. 'But', as Mr. Untermeyer continues, 'since it lacks wildness, it will not be part of the legend.'" 106

CHAPTER VIII

In 1931, George F. Whicher, in his chapter called "Poetry after the Civil War" in American Writers on American Literature, 107 made Emily the central figure in his discussion of the subject:

"From the perspective of the present," he says, "it would seem that the two momentous events in American poetry between 1865 and 1900 were, first the gradual building up to its final, though never completely rounded, form, of Whitman's Leaves of Grass, and second, the secret writing and posthumous publication of Emily Dickinson's poems. These two writers defined the poles of national feeling in their time as Franklin and Edwards defined the cleavage of American thought in the century preceding. The essential differences transmitted from eighteenth-century Deist and Calvanist seemed for a moment to be reconciled in Emerson, the comprehender of opposites, but his attempts to resolve the antinomies of all and each, of love and choice, of expansion and concentration, of democracy and distinction, was premature. Since recent poetry, in so far as it has any intellectual substance, has aligned itself, now with one, now with the other, of the contrasting attitudes represented by Whitman and Emily Dickinson, the development of their basic and still valid modes of endowing life with meaning is from our point of view the main achievement of poetry in the later nineteenth century.

....We recognize in her the last stage of the Puritan's progress from the seventeenth century to our own times." 108

Since 1930, periodical criticism of Emily Dickinson has taken one definite and very salutary turn. With Louis Untermeyer as chief spokesman, the demand for a clearer record of her poetry rather than of her per-

107. American Writers on American Literature op. cit.
sonal life has been sounded and it is earnestly to be hoped that it will not be ineffectual.

In "Thoughts after a Centenary", in the Saturday Review of Literature for June 30, 1931, he remarks on the conflicting accounts of her personal history and dismisses the squabbles with the paragraph:

"Readers waited for Emily Dickinson's niece to affirm, amplify, or repudiate; to say six definite sentences that would clarify the situation; to explain the too-mysterious discovery of the Further Poems, variously stated to have been suppressed or buried or withheld by Sister Lavinia. But not a phrase was forthcoming....Martha Dickinson Bianchi contented herself with a few generalities by way of introduction to the 1930 edition of the Poems, adding nothing and subtracting nothing from her vaguely outlined story of the frustrated affair in Philadelphia."

He then goes on to say:

"There remains the far more important matter of Emily Dickinson's writings. Here, one would imagine there is no reason for contradiction or speculation; the record must be clear if not complete. The contrary is true. We have yet to possess a volume in which all the words of the most gifted woman who ever wrote in America are set down as she wrote them, free of error, recognizable as the poet's final intention.....The very arrangement is a case in point. When, four years after the poet's death, Col. Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd sponsored the first series of Emily Dickinson's unknown poems in 1890,—the rare little grey and white volume with the silver Indian pipes—it was thought expedient to divide the volume into four parts entitled 'Life', 'Nature', 'Love', 'Time and Eternity'. This evidently served its purpose, as a publisher's device or a concession, or as a four-part portfolio, for the editors were faced with a mass of unpublished ms.—countless letters, literally more than a thousand poems—and a sister (Lavinia) prodding them on to publication. But, after three volumes of poetry had appeared it
became evident that the divisions were not only contrary to Emily Dickinson's non-catagorical spirit, but were worse than arbitrary, that many of the poems were actually given a false implication by being so tabulated, and that a new alignment was necessary. Yet the latest Centenary edition (1930) follows the divisions slavishly--divisions which the reader should bear in mind were invented neither by Emily Dickinson nor the present editor.

Any other arrangement--even a merely alphabetical one--would be an improvement. A chronological arrangement would be better still.....No poetry has ever needed rearrangement as much as Emily Dickinson's and none has had so little benefit of editorial examination.

....There is need for a sharper scrutiny than this work has yet received--textually, chronologically, comprehensively. A general overhauling is indicated. Were this the remains of some minor versifier or criticaster, it would not matter. But we are confronted with one of the chief figures in our literature, 'the greatest woman poet of the English language'. We should have an accurate Emily Dickinson, and we should have her complete." 109

This article was followed in the Saturday Review by a very sound suggestion on the part of the editor that there should be an Amherst edition of the Dickinson prose and poetry, sponsored by Amherst college and edited by a group of scholars in collaboration with Mme. Bianchi. 110

In 1931, a new and enlarged edition of the Letters of Emily Dickinson, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, was given to the public. This

110. Ibid, p. 906.
new volume was important because it contained letters which Mrs. Todd, as she explains in the introduction, had kept inviolate for thirty years, and which she saw fit to make public then only because "the sanctities had already been invaded to such a degree and with so much injustice to Emily that facts had become less harmful than conjecture." 112 These letters contained names, furnishing identification to hitherto anonymous persons and Chapter X, was devoted to a series of letters to two brothers, James D. and Charles H. Clark, concerning the Rev. Doctor Charles Wadsworth of Philadelphia.

Aside from the new light which was thrown on details of her life, the publication was significant because, as Morris Schappes observes in American Literature in January of 1933:

".....both the scholarly and the general reading public are given easy access to an authoritative collection that had for a long time been out of print and rare." 113

But more important than either perhaps, was the fact that the new edition brought forth a new Emily Dickinson. As Marianne Moore observes in Poetry for January, 1933:

"If we care about the poems, we value the connection in which certain poems and sayings originated. The chief importance of the letters, however, is their establishing the wholesomeness of the

112. Ibid, Introduction
life. They are full of enthusiasm. The effect of the whole personality is in the lines to Miss Whitney: 'You speak of "disillusion". That is one of the few subjects on which I am an infidel.' Professor Whicher sees in the poems 'the same instinct of sound workmanship that made the Yankee clipper, the Connecticut clock and the New England doorway objects of beauty', and there is in the letters another phase of that exciting realness." 114

The new Emily Dickinson was allowed to come even more distinctly into view with the publication of Emily Dickinson, Face to Face 115 in 1932, in which incidentally Mme. Bianchi repeated the version of "the immortal wound" taken by Emily in Philadelphia, without entering into any of the controversial issues.

Louis Untermeyer, commenting on the book for the Saturday Review of Literature on January 7, 1933, says:

"In this new volume a new Emily Dickinson actually does emerge, a far more comprehensible and less enigmatic creature than the mythical Sphinx of Amherst, a richer spirit and more intimate human being....There can be no question about the validity and importance of the new book...We have the most explicable as well as the most nearly complete portrait yet drawn."

At the close of his article, Mr. Untermeyer reiterates his former complaint and again demands a clearer Emily Dickinson:

"Much of the present misunderstanding and mystification is due to an old and private feud so relentless that a "rapprochement" seems impossible. Yet the attempt must be made. The con-

tinuance of a personal grievance, the cherishing of family quarrels and extra-editorial hatreds has resulted in obscuring the very thing to which both factions are devoted—the full and final presentation of the greatest woman poet of America. Only after such an understanding, or collaboration will there be released the many letters still kept from publication, the unprinted poems, the revealing scraps and sketches. If ever a poet needed a definitive, variorum edition, it is Emily Dickinson, born more than a hundred years ago, whose complete picture is not yet available, and whose work belongs to no one or two persons, but to the world.

With each new book, with every added bit of evidence, the 'mystery' of Emily Dickinson grows more and more tenuous; soon it will entirely dissolve. What remains is the genuine mystery of her genius. That is insoluble."

CONCLUSION

In looking back over the growth of Emily Dickinson's reputation, we may confidently say that although "victory came late" for her, it was a very signal and overwhelming victory. Ignored or sharply condemned by most of the critics of her own day and almost completely forgotten for a period of seventeen years she achieved real critical appreciation only in 1914 with the publication of *The Single Hound*, which occurred simultaneously with interest in the "New Movement" in American verse. She was then acclaimed as the first of "the Moderns" and since that time her reputation has grown steadily and solidly. She has even been hailed as "the forerunner of a spirit that has not yet succeeded in shaping itself". 118

That twenty-four years should have elapsed before her real worth was realized is not incomprehensible if we consider the age in which she lived and wrote and the contrasting elements of her poetry. The late nineteenth century in America was a period of formulas, in social life, in religion, in literature. As her niece said:

".....The world Emily was running from was not the world of now. It was a small country village 'drifted deep in Parian' all the slow winter long, a small country village all the dusty summer through--with its births and deaths, spites, ministerial taking-sides, early tea parties, religious revivals in season, or the

panic of unexpected relatives driving up for unexpected visits. All
of which became empty and arduous beside that inner society peopled
by the Brownings, 'Immortality', 'Eternity', the Brontës and all the
rest of her intimates." 119

Puritanism, at the time during which she lived, was the prevailing
religion but, unperceived by its advocates, its influence was beginning
to decline. Emily Dickinson detected and distrusted the insincerity of
its conventional religious formulas and while her Amherst neighbors went
on being deluded by the precepts of their corseted spiritual discipline
she found her own interpretation of God in the universe and in her own
soul. Poems like:

"Some keep the Sabbath going to church;
I keep it staying at home,
With a bobolink for a chorister,
And an orchard for a dome.

Some keep the Sabbath in surplice;
I just wear my wings
And instead of tolling the bell for church,
The little sexton sings.

God preaches, --a noted clergyman,-
And the sermon is never long;
So instead of going to heaven at last,
I'm going all along! " 120

and the one beginning:

" Their height in heaven comforts not
Their glory nought to me
'Twas best imperfect, as it was;
I'm finite; I can't see. " 121

XIV, and XV.
120. Emily Dickinson, Complete Poems, Boston, Little Brown and Co., 1924,
p. 110.
show her digression from the customs of the cult and show why her earlier editors saw fit to apologise for her apparent irreverence. A more tolerant and less hide-bound public was needed to appreciate the fact that Emily couldn't be satisfied with the Calvanistic rigidity of precise definition so antagonistic to her own intuition of the unknown,—an intuition which we find admirably set forth in such lines as:

"I never saw a moor
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks,
And what a wave must be.

I never spoke with God,
Nor visited in heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if a chart were given."122

In the field of literature, the younger poets of the day were overshadowed by long-lived predecessors. Bryant, Emerson, Whittier, Lowell, Holmes, and Longfellow were still shining forth from their "gift-editions", with faultless rhyme and lofty sentiment. The methods venerated were external methods--outward nature viewed in her daintier aspects and man's soul treated in a high sounding moral tone which was inspiring without being particularly discomforting—which called for an emotional response but which seldom became disagreeable about demanding a mental one.

What Higginson called "the light of the public square" could not, under these circumstances, have been of interest to Emily Dickinson, for her methods were of a different sort. She looked upon nature, not in its

122. Ibid, p. 188.
cosmic but its small and intimate aspects, and the merit in her work lies in the miracles of exactitude which she achieved in her handling of tiny and fragmentary things. As against the larger panoramic views of snowstorm, for example, done in soft and blended tones by contemporary artists in words, we have her sharply colored masterpieces of motion and atmosphere, which resemble more the snap-shots of a highly sensitized sound camera. As an example of this we might take her snake poem:

"A narrow fellow in the grass
Occasionally rides;
You may have met him,—did you not?
His notice sudden is.

The grass divides as with a comb
A spotted shaft is seen;
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on.

He likes a boggy acre,
A floor too cool for corn.
Yet when a child, and barefoot
I more than once, at morn,

Have passed, I thought, a whip-lash
Unbraiding in the sun—
When stooping to secure it,
It wrinkled and was gone.

Several of nature's people
I know, and they know me,
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality;

But never met this fellow,
Attended or alone,
Without a tighter breathing
And zero at the bone." 123

123 Ibid. p. 91.
To realize further her deviation from the "Fringed Gentian" school of nature study, we have only to consider other poems of hers--on the spider, for instance, or the bat, or the toad--or we might try to imagine Longfellow addressing God as "Papa above! " and asking Him to reserve within His Kingdom "a mansion for the Rat." Then we might take a poem such as:

"I'll tell you how the sun rose,--
A ribbon at a time.
The steeples swam in amethyst,
The news like squirrels ran.

The hills untied their bonnets,
The bobolinks begun.
Then I said softly to myself,
' That must have been the sun! ' 

But how he set I know not.
There seemed a purple stile
Which little yellow boys and girls
Were climbing all the while,

Till when they reached the other side
A dominie in gray
Put gently up the evening bars,
And led the flock away."124

to see what a superior job she makes of it when she takes up nature in its broader aspects.

Although her sensitivity to things about her was remarkable, her most extraordinary gift was, as Professor Whicher has pointed out, "her power to discriminate shades and varities of inner weather." While her more

124Ibid p. 121.
illustrious contemporaries were making poetry, she was thinking it. With a brilliant and searching understanding of the heart and its sufferings she was able to catch life in the net of the living word and by some miracle of detachment to lay it bare for mere earthly eyes to see. With quaint phrase and trenchant economy she is able to capture wayward glimpses of hidden feeling. She can say, for example:

"The bustle in a house
The morning after death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon earth,--

The sweeping up the heart
And putting love away
We shall not want to use again
Until eternity." 126

or

"They say that 'time assuages',--
Time never did assuage;
An actual suffering strengthens
As sinews do, with age.

Time is test of trouble,
But not a remedy.
If such it prove, it prove too
There was no malady." 127

There is no easy Victorian optimism here; no bolstering of fact with fancy--only a sharply brilliant recording of what she saw and felt. And in order to accomplish that, she let the rhyme go and stayed with the reason. That was what the Victorian critics could not find it in their

127. Ibid., p. 226.
hearts to forgive her. When her thoughts demanded egress, she paid their
exit fee in pure coin, neither too much nor too little. She reached
down into her bottomless store of gold and produced the exact change. Here
is her feeling for her thought behind the word:

"Could mortal lip divine
   The undeveloped freight
   Of delivered syllable,
   'T would crumble with the weight." 128

Is it to be wondered at then, that with gifts like hers, she found
it impossible to align herself with the surface verse-makers of her own
day and so withdrew into her own soul—and must that withdrawal be ex-
plained externally by prattlings on her frustrated love-affair by surface
theorists of our own day who forget that symptoms of a preference for
"polar privacy" appear in her letters before "the catastrophe" of 1854? As
someone suggested, we do not begrudge the physicist his laboratory;
and why should we reproach Emily Dickinson for similar needs—for a
similar withdrawal?

Perceiving that "fame is a fickle food" and realizing perhaps, that
her faulty syntax and irregular forms could meet with no truly
appreciative eye in her own day, she wrote in secret, preserving her
integrity as an artist, and disregarding all thought of public acclaim.

But a new day in criticism was to dawn and Emily's "little over-
flowing words" were destined to appear "eloquent" in another age. The

accident of delayed publication of the poems which appeared in 1914, in

The Single Hound was to prove a singularly happy accident, and the re-
clus e who had the universe in her garden, the escapist who summoned
infinity with the trick of a forefinger and the crook of her mind was to
come into her own.

The "New Poetry Movement" which began to gain impetus in this
country in 1912, in almost complete reaction to nineteenth century
standards, emphasized actuality and the expression of that actuality
in unhampered form. In extolling what Whitman referred to as "the
glory of the commonplace" the new poets stood for (1.) visual
imagination, (2.) extreme concentration, (3.) simplicity and directness
of speech, (4.) individualistic freedom of idea and (5.) individual
subtlety of rhythm. Emily's work as Amy Lowell pointed out, possessed
all of these characteristics and it was but natural that she should
have been reclaimed. The new generation, with its fondness for ex-
perimentation and its love of abrupt and even jolting sounds was
equipped to see in her work a summarization of all of their preachings.
For visual imagination, they had only to look at fragments like:

"The Winds drew off
Like hungrey dogs
Defeated of a bone."130

---

or

"The clouds their backs together laid,
The north began to push
The forests galloped till they fell
The lightning skipped like mice." 131

For extreme concentration they had only to study something like this:

"The difference between despair
And fear, is like the one
Between the instant of a wreck
And when the wreck has been.

The mind is smooth,--no motion--
Contented as the eye
Upon the forehead of a Bust
That knows it cannot see." 132

and for simplicity and directness of speech, there was this, for example:

"To make a prairie, it takes a clover
and one bee,--
And revery.
The revery alone will do
If bees are few." 133

It was her freedom of idea and of form, however, which most delighted
"the Moderns",--delighted them as much, in fact, as it had bothered the
critics of an earlier day. The piquancy and homeliness of her thoughts,
they found particularly intriguing and her independence and apparent
carelessness of verse forms they were willing to acknowledge not only as
models but as magnificent pieces of skilled workmanship. Louis Untermeyer,
a poet of the present, maintains that:

131. Ibid, p. 188.
"Her experiments in 'slant' or 'suspended' rhyme were far more radical than those of any exponent of assonance; her ungrammatical directness is more spontaneous than the painful dislocations of 'the new barbarians'.

The evidence of this anticipating modernity is everywhere in Further Poems. Emily would have been the last to claim anything—especially the claim of being a fore-runner—yet 'Death's large democratic fingers' might well be E. E. Cummings. MacLeish's 'Ars Poetica' startles us by its pure abstraction:

'Poetry should not mean
But be——'

and Emily (who knows how many years earlier) concludes:

'Beauty is not caused
It is.' 134

and Genevieve Taggard, another Modern who may be considered an expert perhaps, in that she has given considerable study to the verse technique of Emily Dickinson says:

"Her verse accomplishes the most miraculous sound-flutings; her assonance rhyme, like her thought, is a tone that opens in the central atom of feeling, outward.

............Emily's poems are played on plucked strings, on an instrument of great variety and range. Her scope is wide and the tones are many—she finds infinite subtleties between the gaps of our crude scale—but there is only one method—the direct stroke of a bold hand. She has no bow as has Edna Millay, who by one long sweep gives us a lyric line of marvelous power. This inability to link words endlessly has kept Emily from having an understanding audience. Her gift is static—'to scalp the naked soul' by an instant's sound and image.

However they may out-do her in cumulative melody, Emily surpasses our contemporaries, Edna Millay and Elinor Wylie in the simple matter of range. From this silver bliss:

'I taste a liquor never brewed,
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not all the vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an alcohol!' 134

Inebriate of air am I,
And debauchée of dew,
Reeling, through endless summer days,
From inns of molten blue. etc.'

she runs the clear half-notes downward to:

'The heart asks pleasure first,
And then, excuse from pain;
And then, those little anodynes
That deaden suffering.
And then to go to sleep;
And then if it should be
The will of the Inquisitor,
The liberty to die.' "135

The American Poetic Renaissance, if it had accomplished no other
good, would be significant in that it called attention to the fact that
Emily Dickinson, who had been regarded as a minor nineteenth century
poetess, was to be reckoned with as one of the major voices that
America has produced. Her lustre, moreover, was not dimmed with the
waning of the Free Verse hysteria. Her influence was then and is now
exceedingly great. Enthusiasm for her work and for that of later experi-
mentalists has called attention to the broad wealth that may be tapped
within a narrow sphere, if that sphere be approached with honesty and
accuracy. It has also stressed the importance of freedom from super-
imposed rules and regulations. American literature as a result has
broken the bonds of out-worn tradition and in doing so, has been able
to realize more fully a native power as important as that depicted in

the work of our earlier artists in local color. Washington Irving has been credited with the prose pioneering in the school which emphasized our native landscape. May not Emily Dickinson be accorded the laurel for her discovery of an equally important poetic landscape—the landscape of the soul?

Others have come, and, if current tendencies are an indication, may continue to come after her, but surely no one really preceded her in the vast field of objective psychological poetry.

At the present time, Emily Dickinson is looked upon as the writer of some of the most interesting poetry that America has yet produced. As recently as April of 1934, Thornton Wilder referred to her in a lecture as "the greatest of all the Puritans", and mentioned her tartness as one of the ingredients that must necessarily go into the recipe for the great American masterpiece of the future. What the next chapter in the history of her reputation will be, it is difficult to say. As Allen Tate remarks:

"If Emily Dickinson has been misunderstood, it is because we lack a critical tradition, passed on from generation to generation, which alters as the spirit of literature alters, yet in its comprehension of the past with the present, remains clear and fundamentally the same. Our criticism of poetry seldom gets beyond impressionism; it starves in the famine of general ideas."

Who knows but that with the coming of such a critical tradition, and with further publication of her work, still greater fields may yet be won and Emily Dickinson may assume her rightful place among the great poetic voices of all time?

137. Louis Untermeyer, in the Saturday Review of Literature, for July 5, 1930, remarked on the fact that:

"In 1892, The Book-Buyer, commenting on the first two volumes of Emily Dickinson's poems (containing 282 poems), said: 'Besides the poems collected....there are at least twelve hundred poems catalogued, and no one knows how many more in a mass of notes found among her possessions.' None of the editors has disputed the figures, yet the edition of complete poems in 1924 included only 597 poems."

Further Poems, in 1929, augmented Mr. Untermeyer's total by only 181, making a total of 778. If The Book-Buyer is correct, this leaves rather a wide margin of unpublished poetic material, in addition to the unprinted groups of letters which are known to exist.


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41. "Two Poets", Edmund Lester Pearson., The Outlook, CXXXVII(July, 23, 1924), 479.
54. "Emily Dickinson", Lawrence Abbott, The Outlook, CXL(June 10, 1925), 211-213.
55. "Victory Comes Late to Emily Dickinson", Literary Digest, "International Book Review", III(November, 1925), 780-781.
60. "Emily Dickinson", Allen Tate., The Outlook, CXL (August 15, 1928), 621-623.
64. "Nerves Like Tombs", Mark Van Doren., The Nation, CXXVIII (March 20, 1929), 348-349.
68. "Emily Dickinson and Her Editors", Conrad Aiken., Yale Review, XVIII (Summer, 1929), 796-798.


77. "New Names for the Hall of Fame", (Emily Dickinson Portrait)., Publisher's Weekly, CXVII (March 8, 1930), 1334-1335.


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The thesis "Emily Dickinson: The Growth of Her Reputation in Periodical Criticism, 1890-1934," written by Ruth Corrigan, has been accepted by the Graduate School of Loyola University, with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below, with reference to content. It is, therefore, accepted as a partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree conferred.

Morton D. Zabel, Ph.D. May 2, 1934
Julius V. Kuhinka May, 1934